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ABSTRACT

The role of co-investigator, in which the teacher leaves the classroom for half a day to work on a selected research project, is delineated. Teacher collaborators become involved as active participants with professional researchers in all phases of the research project in progress. The issues involved in collaboration, including the characteristics of teacher co-investigators, procedures for selecting them, training of teachers and researchers, and the duration of a given collaborative effort are discussed. (JD)

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A Symposium

Teachers Become Partners in Educational Research

The Teacher As Co-Investigator In Research on Teaching

prepared by

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The Teacher as Co-Investigator in Research on Teaching

Lucy B. Knappen

Since its inception, the Institute for Research on Teaching (IRT) has incorporated a model of teacher collaboration in all phases of the research process. The significance of the contributions that teacher co-investigators have made to the research process and the potential benefits for educational research have become obvious to the IRT. However, at a recent conference, the concept of teachers collaborating as co-investigators met with considerable skepticism from conference participants. This reaction could be indicative of the degree of separation and isolation that exists among the various constituent groups comprising the education community. It is imperative to consider whether this segmenting of the community is counterproductive to the process and outcomes of research. Does the practitioner, in fact, have anything to offer to the process of research?

In the field of medical practice the contributions of the practitioner to the development of knowledge is well-established. For example, the use of digitalis to treat edema, was documented by a practicing physician 200 years ago. Subsequent beneficial effects of digitalis on controlling the edema of certain types of heart failures have been so obvious and so reproducible that scientific substantiation has not been necessary. It is accepted in the medical field that a treatment which improves a condition believed up to that time to be terminal or at least progressively debilitating does not need armloads of scientific literature to justify its use.

However, in medicine, it is recognized that it is impractical for the clinical practitioner to also be his own scientific investigator. The

average medical practitioner, no matter how able and conscientious, rarely has the training, experience, and volume of patients within his practice to become a clinical investigator. As the practitioner who discovered digitalis, stated in his report; "I cannot pretend to charge my memory with particular cases or particular effects and I had not the leisure to make notes." His statement has direct application to the practitioner in education as well.

As a result of research in medicine and education, the physician and the teacher, at least theoretically, have at their disposal a body of potentially helpful information that has been gathered by scientifically acceptable means. Whether or how they will use it depends on their acquaintance with that information, on their judgment of its validity, and on their logic in applying that information appropriately. Therefore, collaboration between practitioner and researcher in the fields of medical and educational practice hold the potential for the development of more useful research. The quality of research findings, that is what comes to be known, is richer with a resultant cycle of research and practice that is both productive and mutually beneficial.

Potential benefits for educational research become apparent through a description of the IRT model of the teacher as a co-investigator in research on teaching. As co-investigators, teachers participate in all phases of the research process. The nature of that participation is determined by the individual teacher's expertise, abilities, and interests, as well as the needs of the research project. Since teachers have often judged research as lacking utility for teachers and researchers frequently find teachers' concerns too broad to be researchable, the teacher co-investigator role is essential during the conception of the research endeavor. By working together research is

produced that is useful for practice. We have observed that collaboration can result in the synthesis of the practitioners' broad approach to classroom teaching and the researchers' analytical approach to the study of teaching. Through collaboration, research questions and problems are identified that not only interest researchers but also have the potential for improving practice.

For example, IRT's Classroom Strategy Study evolved from concerns of collaborating teachers over effective methods of working with children whose behavior demanded an inordinate amount of the teacher's time and attention. In IRT's Language Arts Project practitioners wanted to study how teachers selected meaningful learning tasks for children and how these language arts activities could be integrated with other subjects to increase motivation and instructional time alloted to reading, writing, and speaking. Through collaboration with researchers and other teacher educators the study of integration and meaningfulness in language arts instruction was developed. Thus a research project and a major study at the IRT have resulted from the contributions of practitioners.

After the conceptualization phase of a study, the teacher's role as a co-investigator changes. The researcher's expertise in design and methodology become critical factors in subsequent development of a study. It is at this point that the teacher has the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the research process. At the IRT, teacher co-investigators acquire skills in methodology, data collection and analysis procedures through their continuing participation on the research team. Teachers, however, like other professionals, differ in expertise, abilities, and interests and these differences are important to consider in the implementation of a model of collaboration. At the Institute, teacher interests and research needs are taken into account during the selection process.

A related issue in considering the nature of the teacher co-investigator role concerns the notion of shared responsibility. First, teachers have the responsibility to openly express their views to ensure that their potential contributions are given serious attention. Teacher co-investigators are no more responsible for representing all teachers than a researcher is accountable for researchers in general, but there are basic responsibilities to be considered. Teachers have the responsibility to enrich their development as professionals by continuing to contribute throughout the data collection and analysis phases of a study. At the IRT, teachers share the responsibility for dissemination of findings as well as communicating to other teachers the professional opportunities available through collaboration. IRT policy does not mandate levels of responsibility for teachers, but co-investigators should be listed as study co-authors when appropriate and held accountable as a member of the research team. In this way, the development of personal accountability is encouraged.

A dual membership in two distinct segments of the educational community is implied by this model of collaboration. The classroom teacher becoming a co-investigator, faces the problem of orientation into the new milieu without losing sight of the old. The effective co-investigator, based on IRT experience, is equally comfortable in the cultures of the public schools and educational research and is able to translate and mediate between the two. Translation requires that the teacher find the linguistic connection between the terms of research and the shop talk of schools. During research planning sessions, teachers must communicate the concerns and interests of the classroom in terms meaningful to researchers. Later, the teachers must convey the significance of findings and their applications to practice. As a mediator, the collaborator confronts the prevailing

attitudes of mistrust and suspicion within the research and practice segments of the education community. If mediation is successful, collaboration will result in improved research with subsequent acceptance and implementation in practice. In short, the teacher co-investigator must be a teacher, a co-investigator, and a master of diplomacy.

Candidates for a co-investigative role should be interested in collaboration as a means for improving teaching and education. Qualifications in specific content areas are generally secondary. At the IRT, the most profitable and effective form of collaboration occurs when there is a match between a teacher's interests and research needs, so candidates are provided with descriptions of research in progress and the potential direction for the co-investigator's role at the Institute.

Working as a co-investigator offers many opportunities yet requires adaptations on the part of the teacher to this new role. Since the IRT model of co-investigation takes place in the research environment, the practitioner has the opportunity to experience research in its context. This context includes colloquia and seminars with IRT staff and visiting scholars. An important aspect of this research setting is the ongoing critical review of the research process from conceptualization to dissemination of research findings. These activities of the research community are rarely seen by teachers. However, entry into the research environment is not a simple transition. It has been compared by some teacher co-investigators to entering a foreign country. The reflective level of work experienced in seminars and project meetings offers sharp contrast to the doing-acting-reacting level in the milieu of the schools. The role of co-investigator, at the IRT, implies professional acceptance as temporary faculty, a sudden contrast to teachers' common prior experience as students at the University.

To ease this entry discomfort the new teacher co-investigator is teamed with an experienced teacher collaborator during their first weeks at the IRT. Since the object of co-investigation is not to turn teachers into researchers, technical training is provided as indicated by the project's current needs. It is an unnecessary duplication of effort to insist that teachers and researchers possess identical skills to complete similar tasks. Each makes a unique contribution to the task at hand. Through their participation, teachers have opportunities to become familiar with technical aspects of design and methodology. Research is not some mysterious rite to be disclosed to and practiced only by a few.

Since a major responsibility of the collaborating practitioner is to review a study and its methodology and to provide a reality check, intense involvement with a study, over time, could interfere with evaluating the research from a practical standpoint. IRT policy, states that teachers should be encouraged to participate in a research project for two years or until a natural break occurs in a project. Although teacher commitment and continuing interest are of obvious importance, it may be of equal importance for research and the teaching profession to offer the co-investigative experience to as many teachers as possible.

Collaboration in research also provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect upon what they do in the classroom. Many teachers have an internal data base for successful practices but are seldom asked to share this knowledge with others. This aspect of collaboration can be of direct benefit to teaching as well as the outcomes of research.

Teachers also need to feel confident that the professional growth achieved during the co-investigative experience is not terminated at the formal conclusion of collaboration but will continue in new and

expanding roles. Teachers who have returned to the classroom fulltime discover that the professional independence developed during their tenure at the Institute may be perceived by administrators and other school district personnel as a threat to the status quo. Also, the continuing dialogue, with its diversity of views, within the Institute constitutes a valued set of interactions that may no longer be present when returning to classroom teaching.

Teacher organizations and school districts need to realize that the co-investigator role can increase teacher insight and self-awareness, enhance classroom effectiveness, and reduce the isolation of teachers from the rest of the education community. Several of the IRT's former co-investigators have continued in research projects on a consultant basis. There are obvious implications for continued participation in the areas of research dissemination and application, but a continuing relationship with the research center should not be the only option for teachers. Former co-investigators can take on new roles and responsibilities in schools.

The need for conducting workshops for teachers, resource personnel to train practitioners for collaborative work in research, and development of research skills applicable to the classroom should be considered by school district personnel. We would argue that school districts would be acting irresponsibly not to carefully consider the potential contributions of returning teacher co-investigators to the improvement of practice and the development of research within their schools.

As a final cautionary statement: if we rush to heed the cali for collaboration without deliberation and planning, there is the very real danger of jumping on a bandwagon with the risk of destroying the concept of collaborative work. We need careful consideration of the

questions. When is the role of teacher co-investigator appropriate and when is it inappropriate? We need deliberation on "meaningful" collaboration as an alternative to "rubber stamping" or window dressing. Further, it does not appear necessary to devise new paradigms or schemes for doing practical research, simply for the purposes of "involving" teachers in educational inquiry. It appears most sincere and respectful of a teacher's insights and potential contributions to research if they are included in the mainstream of existing research endeavors. When teachers become an integral part of the research community, they have become partners in the pursuit of an improved knowledge base needed by our education profession.

Finally, we need to view collaboration as a symbiotic relationship. To paraphrase the biological definition; symbiosis is the working together of two dissimilar organisms, especially when this association is mutually beneficial. The practitioner does not have to experience metamorphosis into researcher nor does the researcher transmute into practitioner. Each makes a complementary contribution to the research enterprise. We then have the potential for the whole becoming greater than the sum of its parts.

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